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TAGS: PGOV PREL TSPA SENV RS KZ
SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: AMBASSADOR ACCOMPANIES NASA DELEGATION TO BAIKONUR FOR SOYUZ LAUNCH



¶1. (SBU) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: During March 25-27, the Ambassador accompanied a NASA delegation to the Baikonur cosmodrome in south-central Kazakhstan to observe the launch of a Russian Soyuz space capsule destined for the International Space Station. All Soviet and Russian human spaceflight missions have originated from Baikonur. Kazakhstan currently leases Baikonur to Russia for $115 million per year through 2050. On launch day, May 26, the Ambassador and the NASA Delegation headed for Site 254 where the group witnessed the crew suit up and then toured the Baikonur Space Museum. Finally, after arriving at the launch site's viewing stands, the delegation observed the successful launch of the Soyuz TMA-14 space capsule. U.S-Russian cooperation and partnership in space exploration has endured in spite of political ups and downs in the overall bilateral relationship and may become even more fruitful and productive in the future. END SUMMARY.

AMBASSADOR ACCOMPANIES NASA DELEGATION

¶3. (SBU) The Ambassador, together with the Regional Environmental Officer (REO), accompanied a NASA delegation to the Baikonur cosmodrome in south-central Kazakhstan to observe the May 26 launch of a Russian Soyuz TMA-14 space capsule destined for the International Space Station (ISS Flight 18S). The Soyuz crew members were Commander Gennady Padalka (Russia), Flight Engineer Michael Barrett (U.S.), and Space Flight Participant Charles Simonyi, a former Microsoft executive from the United States who was making his second trip into space. Senior NASA delegation members who attended the launch included Associate Administrator for Program Analysis and Evaluation Michael Hawes, Associate Administrator for Space Operations Bill Gerstenmaier, Kennedy Space Center Director Bob Cabana, and Johnson Space Center Deputy Director Ellen Ochoa. Anatoliy Perminov, head of Roskosmos, Russia's federal space agency, also attended the event, as did Russian Ambassador to Kazakhstan

Mikhail Bocharnikov and representatives of the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency.

BAIKONUR BACKGROUND

¶4. (SBU) The Soviet Union originally constructed the Baikonur cosmodrome as a site for the testing and development of its first ICBM and later expanded the site in the late 1950s to accommodate space flight activities. All Soviet and Russian human spaceflight missions have originated from Baikonur. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Baikonur fell under Kazakhstan's control, and Russia and Kazakhstan now have an agreement under which Kazakhstan leases Baikonur to Russia for $115 million per year through 2050. Located in semi-arid south-central Kazakhstan, the Baikonur cosmodrome covers approximately 4000 square miles of territory (80 by 50 miles) and contains 52 launch pads. The nearby city of Baikonur, built to support the cosmodrome, had been a secret town with various names over the years in an attempt to hide the cosmodrome's actual location. Down from a high of 100,000, the city's population now numbers approximately 60,000. It sits on the north bank of the Syr-Darya river, one of the two major rivers in Central Asia that flow into the Aral Sea. In addition, the Moscow-Tashkent railroad runs through Baikonur.

VISIT TO BURAN AND SOYUZ LAUNCH SITES

¶5. (SBU) After their arrival at Baikonur, the NASA delegation drove from the cosmodrome's Yubileyniy airport -- where the Buran Space Shuttle landed after its one and only orbital flight -- across bleak empty steppes to visit the Energia launch site, where the heavy-lift Energia rocket was launched for the first time. Since 1993, this launch site has not been used, and signs of its sad decay led one observer to comment that it resembled a "Mad Max" movie set. The delegation then traveled to the Soyuz launch site to see the rocket that would be launched the next day. The Soyuz launch site contains



a moving memorial to the historic first Sputnik satellite launched into space in 1957 from this site -- an event which profoundly shook the U.S. scientific establishment and helped spur the establishment of NASA. The monument's inscription says simply: "It is here that the genius of the Soviet people began their audacious assault on space."

¶6. (SBU) One could feel the imprint of history and the ebb and flow of Soviet and Russian endeavors over time. Observing the rocket that would be launched the next day, one NASA scientist commented admiringly that this Russian rocket's design is basic and simple but durable, robust, and reliable, and it can be launched in any weather. He noted that U.S. rockets are high-tech, sophisticated, and very capable, but they are more dependent on the weather conditions being optimal before they can be launched.

BAIKONUR THE CITY

¶7. (SBU) After visiting the launch sites, the delegation arrived for its stay at the Sputnik Hotel. The Sputnik is a reasonably good quality hotel, but it is far from being a luxury establishment. The hotel restaurant, enjoying a de facto monopoly because of its somewhat isolated location on the outskirts of Baikonur city, required delegation members to order meals off a special menu that cost 35 euros per person, even though the menu also had cheaper alternatives, which the delegation was told were "unavailable." REO learned from a NASA official that this had not been the case the day before, but the hotel would not budge, because it claimed that it always moves to a fixed-price meal the day immediately prior to a launch. A number of delegation members (REO included) walked 40 minutes into town to a pizzeria, crowded with young Kazakhstani enjoying the evening out. The prices were all in Russian rubles (reflecting the "leased" nature of the city), but one could also pay in tenge, the Kazakhstani currency -- unlike at the Sputnik Hotel, which refused tenge and would only accept dollars, euros, or rubles. A NASA photographer, who had been to Baikonur some fifteen times since 1993, said when the pizzeria first opened, it was the first western-style restaurant in Baikonur, and competitors started a smear campaign, pasting leaflets on trees all over town warning

citizens that they would become deathly sick if they went to eat there. Judging from the crowded tables at the pizzeria the night we visited, it appears the campaign has failed to dissuade Baikonur's youth from frequenting the establishment.

SUIT UP AND SPACE MUSEUM

¶8. (SBU) On March 26, Launch Day, the NASA delegation departed the Sputnik Hotel in a heavy rain and headed for Site 254, where the group witnessed the crew suit up and report to the Roskosmos State Commission on its readiness for launch. While the crew went to the capsule, the group toured the Baikonur Space Museum, which is filled with historical memorabilia of the Soviet and Russian space programs and their achievements, saw one of the Buran Space Shuttle orbiter test models up close, and visited the cottages of cosmonaut Yuriy Gagarin (the first man launched into space on April 12, 1961), where he spent the night prior to launch, and Sergey Korolev, who is considered the founder of the Soviet space program.

SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH

¶9. (SBU) The delegation then arrived at the viewing site, an open-air covered viewing stand one mile from the actual launch site. Shivering and cold, the group watched the rocket carrying the Soyuz space capsule successfully lift off the pad and disappear into the clouds, leaving behind a fiery tail in its wake. We could not help but feel, at that moment, that we had witnessed something special that few people actually have a chance to see. We also saw a clear instance of the continuing close U.S-Russian cooperation and partnership in space exploration that has endured in spite of political ups and downs in our overall bilateral relationship and



may become even more fruitful and productive in the future.

HOAGLAND